

The Politics of Recovery Testing

by Philip Jan Rothstein

It should be no surprise to anyone in the business world that disaster recovery testing is susceptible to the inter-personal and inter-departmental give-and-take which characterizes most any significant organizational endeavor. The degree of maneuvering, posturing and negotiating seem to correlate to the importance of (and effort required for) most any corporate undertaking. Therefore it should not be surprising that disaster recovery testing engenders more than its share of controversy. Moreover, the all-too-common perception that disaster recovery testing (let alone planning) is a discretionary investment adds to the difficulty in traversing the minefield of corporate politics. It should also be noted that many of the issues addressed in this article are not unlike those faced in developing and implementing the continuity or recovery plan in the first place.

Commitment and Motivation

It is absolutely essential to the process that the *commitment* to recovery testing be authentic and clearly communicated prior to beginning the testing process. All too often, the commitment is either shallow or implied, thereby dooming the testing program, and likely the entire disaster recovery capability, to failure. The direct result is most certain to be failure of the disaster recovery program when it is needed most, that is, as a critical tool during an actual disruption.

A critical distinction between effective or ineffective recovery testing programs can be observed by answering the question:

Is the disaster recovery testing program designed and implemented as a tool to be used *during an actual recovery, or as evidence*?

The incompetent recovery testing program is, as often as not, a direct result of a powerful, organizational incentive to produce tangible documentation rather than to produce less visible (but far more critical) changes to the organization. In other words, given the task of putting together a testing program, a manager or staff member is most likely to be motivated to deliver an impressive paper document. Of course, the same incentives apply to recovery plan development.

That paper document may or may not be important to the organization during an actual disruption. Far more likely to be vital to recovery is the team experience and process shakedown from exercising the actual testing program. Therefore, one should be conscious of this common, underlying pressure to produce *evidence* to satisfy management, auditors, regulators or others -- evidence which appears to meet the stated demands, but which in fact is unlikely to work when it is most needed.

It is a clear symptom of a weak or absent commitment from top management, when the contingency testing program (and presumably the underlying contingency plan) fall into this 'evidence' trap. The factors which motivate top management to commit to recovery testing are closely related to the motivating factors for implementation of the recovery program in the first place. Top management must be made to understand that (1) an untested contingency plan is unlikely to succeed in an actual recovery; (2) testing (and, for that matter, plan maintenance) is

an integral part of the plan development and implementation process, and not an option; and, (3) an untested contingency plan could, in an actual disruption, turn out to be dangerous as a result of unverified assumptions.

The factors motivating an organization to implement a continuity exercise program often do not carry much weight with business partners, vendors or other departments. Motivating these outside parties to participate even minimally in a testing program could take more effort than any other aspect of the test planning and management process. With outside vendors or business partners who do not respond to the obvious arguments for their active participation in the testing program, the simplest method to overcome resistance or apathy is typically to point to competitors who would be eager to participate. With other departments or divisions, pointing out the potential direct, tangible impact on them of a failure of the testing department or business unit to recover from disruption is usually sufficient. If all else fails, appealing to top management is prudent providing, of course, that top management is truly committed to continuity testing in the first place.

Test Prioritization

The second organizational issue to tackle in the process of implementing and operating a disaster recovery testing program is usually to determine the relative priorities and sequence of business areas, functions, locations or processing applications to be tested. Theoretically, the earliest test subjects should be those which are deemed most critical. In practice, visibility and the potential for embarrassment are far more likely to be motivating factors for choosing (or avoiding) a functional area than is criticality.

On the other hand, the earliest test participants, if even modestly successful, can serve as valuable role models (if not outright advocates), to encourage other business areas to understand and appreciate the value and benefits of testing. Therefore, some initial consideration should be given to areas which are likely to benefit significantly and directly from the testing process and to have a positive testing experience, even if these areas are *not* the most critical. Consideration should also be given to those managers who are "on the fence," likely to be won over and to become enthusiastic supporters of recovery testing.

An additional consideration under the heading of "embarrassment" is that the first few tests are most likely to be the most awkward and cumbersome. In other words, the first areas tested should be aware that they are "guinea pigs." This can be used to advantage; these early participants are, in effect, being asked for their assistance in developing and implementing a workable testing process. Therefore, the pressure on the business area (and potential for embarrassment) is easily deflected. Table-top exercises and structured walkthroughs are ideal for these first few tests and, with little extra effort, can even be made quite enjoyable as well as productive for the participants.

Specific, tangible and realistic objectives should *always* be established for each test cycle. Further, intangible objectives should be considered, which are likely to motivate participants. At the least, the knowledge that their functional area has been tested first and is therefore in better shape to withstand a disruption than other business areas should at least in theory be appealing.

Confidentiality

Especially during the initial rounds of recovery testing, line managers and other test participants are likely to be acutely conscious of the potential to be put on the spot without being sufficiently knowledgeable or prepared. For a testing program to be successful, test participants should feel comfortable being open and uninhibited, especially in identifying weaknesses or shortcomings as well as opportunities for improvement. It is inherently uncomfortable for most people to acknowledge their shortcomings. Furthermore, since these participants probably have had little, if any prior experience conducting disaster recovery tests, this comfort level is likely to be quite low.

One approach to increase this comfort level, and thereby increase the productivity of the initial tests, is to assure the participants of some limited degree of confidentiality. With the concurrence of their upper management, the initial recovery testing process can be positioned explicitly as a learning tool (which, of course, it is anyway). If the participants are assured of the confidentiality of the appropriate aspects (i.e., the most potentially embarrassing aspects) of their participation in the testing process, they are far more likely to participate fully and willingly. After the initial round(s) of testing, the need as well as desirability to maintain this level of confidentiality should diminish.

Confidentiality may also be a factor when an exercise program crosses organizational, divisional or departmental boundaries, and even for participating client or vendor organizations. Negotiated, carefully defined ground rules may be needed to address confidentiality during the design of the testing program. Obviously, simulated or modified test data should be employed wherever practical, providing that this substitution does not materially alter the process or outcome of the exercise. At the conclusion of the exercise process, an explicit procedure for destroying any confidential test data should be included.

Discipline

For any disaster recovery testing program to prove effective, it must be ongoing and consistent. The reality of most organizations is that planning and testing for a potential event which may never occur can easily slip down in the priority list when stacked against day-to-day urgencies. Therefore, it is generally advisable to address consistency and discipline early in the disaster recovery testing program. It is a pretty safe bet that management's focus will shift away sooner or later, even if testing starts out as a high priority.

One useful method to at least maintain an ongoing level of awareness and discipline is to document and budget a recovery testing program up front as an ongoing, multi-year program. When presented with a well thought-out, continuing plan, top management (as well as management of affected business or functional areas) are much more likely to stick with the program.

One specific technique which has proved useful in many organizations is to regularly refer to tests or test phases with terms which avoid the inference of completion. Such terms as "interim," "strawman," or "trial" may be used to logically set the stage for the next iteration of testing.

Another technique which works well to focus attention on continuation of the testing process, is to specifically define each test as a step in the overall testing scheme, that is, to spell out a long-term testing program. Of course, the contingency planner should stay aware of the risk of blindly

following the approved testing program without periodic reviews and retuning. Alternately, this can be expressed as a percentage of a "complete" testing cycle where the end of one cycle becomes the beginning of the next cycle -- the classic analogy of the bridge painter starting over again after reaching the end of the bridge may be appropriate.

Conclusion

Continuity/recovery testing is not immune from politics or personalities. Any contingency planner who assumes otherwise will fail -- and, more often than not, will be out of a job. The failure of many contingency planners is less often in their awareness of politics and personalities than in their willingness to apply the management and interpersonal skills necessary to overcome resistance.

Philip Jan Rothstein is president of Rothstein Associates Inc., an international management consulting firm focusing on business continuity, disaster avoidance, disaster recovery and continuous availability. He is publisher of *The Rothstein Catalog On Disaster Recovery*, the disaster recovery industry's principal resource for books, videos, research reports and software.

4 Arapaho Rd., Brookfield, CT 06804-3104 USA

phone 203.740.7400 or 1-888-ROTHSTEIN

fax 203.740.7401

e-mail pjr@rothstein.com ; home page <http://www.rothstein.com>

This article is adapted from the book, *Disaster Recovery Testing: Exercising Your Contingency Plan*, Philip Jan Rothstein, editor ((c)1994, 1996, Rothstein Associates Inc., Ossining, New York; ISBN#0-9641648-0-9). Used with permission.